

THE

CONNECTION



Air Force Families Forever Newsletter

2021, VOL. 2, ISSUE 1

For Air Force and Space Force Families Across the Department of the Air Force

Mark Your Calendar

Memorial Day
May 31

Flag Day
June 14

Independence Day
July 4

**National Korean War
Veterans Armistice Day**
July 27

Suicide Awareness Month
September

**National POW/MIA
Recognition Day**
Sept. 17

Air Force Birthday
Sept. 18

**Gold Star Families
Remembrance Week**
Sept. 19-26

**Gold Star Mother's and
Family's Day**
Sept. 26

Recognizing our fallen with a new special scholarship

by *Danielle Dennis*
Air Force Families Forever program manager

2020 was a year to remember with many challenges and triumphs. Air Force Families Forever considers the partnership with Columbia Southern Education Group to present the first Mimi Mayes Families Forever Scholarship a 2020 achievement.

Mimi Mayes, the scholarship's namesake, is a co-founder of Columbia Southern University and serves in an executive advisory capacity at the university.

For several years, Columbia Southern Education Group recognized through scholarship the sacrifices made by surviving family members of other branches of Service, but 2020 was the first year to offer a scholarship to an Department of the Air Force survivor.

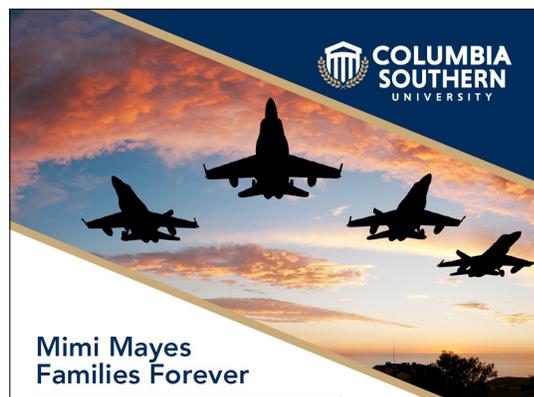
In January 2021, after more than a year of coordination, Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, U. S. Central Command, Commander presided over the scholarship presentation honoring the life and service of a beloved Airman who was assigned to CENTCOM at his untimely death. The family member recipient was awarded \$25,200 to be applied directly to her tuition for up to three years or until completion of her selected

online degree.

The partnership with Columbia Southern Education Group will continue with another scholarship in the fall of 2021. Applicants must be a spouse, child, sibling, or parent of a fallen Regular Air Force, U. S. Space Force, or Reserve Component Airman or Guardian who died in an active duty, Inactive Duty Training, or Annual Training status.

The scholarship is one of several Air and Space Force initiatives to improve recognition and remembrance of fallen Airmen, Guardians, and their families

To learn more about the application process, please contact your nearest Air Force Families Forever program or visit, <https://www.columbiasouthern.edu/tuition-financing/scholarships/families-forever> for more information.



Using intentional storytelling as a way to heal

by Linda K. Ambard
Surviving spouse

I was never supposed to be anything except a teacher. Even as a child, I played at teaching and I grew up teaching swimming to others. I loved that role and nothing felt better than seeing that lightbulb go on when a child learned to read or discovered the love of a subject I taught. I loved mentoring and coaching youth, but I walked away from teaching in 2013. It had nothing to do with burnout or not being good enough.

On April 27, 2011, my husband of 23 years, Maj. Phil Ambard, was assassinated by someone he liked and trusted (should have been able to like and trust) while he was serving as an adviser to Afghanistan. My life imploded in one terrible event. I lost my husband, the father of our five children (four of whom serve), and my dreams for the future. People could see those losses, but they did not see or comprehend losses such as being the visible reminder to military families that I was teaching, my status as far as a military spouse, friendships, sense of self, community because I had to move, and life direction. I also lost my faith in the Air Force because at the time so many things went wrong with the notification, briefings that followed, and mistakes that were made.

Quite simply, I was drowning. I could barely breathe. I was shocked at how much grief physically hurt. I simply was surviving. Initially, I survived by breathing through the pain one second at a time, one minute at a time, one hour at a time, one day, one mile, one marathon at a time.

I have run over 200 marathons. A marathon is 26.2 miles. There isn't one of them I haven't wanted to quit. I know it is going to hurt -- a lot. It is going to hurt more tomorrow and more the next day, but I also know that if I look only at the step in front of me, I can get to a place I know I can power through. I may fall. I may get lost or need to take a break. I may need to lean on a friend or stop and rest, but I can do it. I can do it.

In that initial breathing through the pain, I was surviving. I didn't want strategies or well-meaning people to tell me what to do. I needed the people who showed up and said, "I don't know what to say, but I am here." I needed the people who would show up at my house and



Maj. Phil Ambard, in a photo taken earlier in his career, died while serving in Afghanistan. (Courtesy photo)

ask me for a walk. I needed the people who said, "I am going to a movie. Come with me." I needed the cards, the small gifts, the notes and the encouragement.

People kept asking me about Phil and how I was doing. Two things early on dictated my answers. First, I knew that it would crush Phil if I couldn't find a way to live without him. I knew beyond a shadow of doubt that he wanted me to be happy if something happened to him because it was our last face-to-face conversation. Second, I didn't want the assassin to win my life too. Terrorism seeks to destroy life and maim the human spirit. Those two factors led to choices that I made about two years into my grief journey.

I honored Phil and his choice to join the American military to get his U.S. citizenship at 18 by telling his story. I told his story at many marathon races and through

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THE CONNECTION

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STORYTELLING

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writing a series of blogs. I kept my blogs real and I talked about the things I was doing to deal with the gut-wrenching grief journey.

The Air Force started listening and through a series of events, I was offered the opportunity to go to master resiliency trainer certification. That class was a game changer. That class motivated me to go back to school in military resiliency counseling (and thanatology) where I studied resiliency and positive trauma growth. I got the right credentials and did the right published research in positive trauma growth because I wanted my words to mean something.

I recognized that it wasn't a matter of if people were going to go through a body slam, but when they would have a life event or series of life



Maj. Phil Ambard (right) and his son, Capt. Tim Ambard. (Courtesy photo)

events that will put them on their knees. I began using my story intentionally. I began to weave in the resiliency skills and the use of the word "choices" as I told my story to Airmen. I began looking for other storytellers who I vetted and partnered with helping such as chaplains; military family life counselors; dieticians; and mental health, alcohol and drug counselors. The idea of intentional storytelling was to take a story and coach another to tell it in a manner that inspired and reinforced resiliency-skill techniques from other trainings. By partnering intentionally, the professionals gave further skills and encouraged the use of Air Force resources in whatever journey the Airman was on.

One example I give is the use of a master resiliency trainer. His wife developed eye cancer. His story talked about how exhausting it was to be strong all of the time when he was afraid, how it impacted his family, his military career, his faith, his life. I partnered him with a chaplain and a mental health professional to give strategies about what to do if someone close to a person is going through something.

These stories connected with people. People felt safer telling their stories about what was happening in their lives. People began to see the relevance of resiliency skills as they watched and heard resiliency in action

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It has been 10 years since my husband was killed. If I have learned anything, it is this: Everyone hurts sometimes. Everyone has been through something or will go through something.

Linda K. Ambard
Surviving spouse

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through the intention of the story and the practices embedded in the story

Yes, it takes work. Each and every story must be vetted and practiced. Choosing the right helping agency to partner with the storyteller is crucial to the storytelling being educational and motivational. Through using this intentional approach, I have been able to use my journey at the right time to channel my grief into a positive remembrance by allowing me to make a difference for other people who are suffering.

Consider for a short second a breast cancer survivor. Many get involved in the Susan B Komen foundation as a way to thrive versus just survive after a cancer diagnosis. By using my story in the right way -- not just a train wreck to entertain -- I have been able to teach, coach and inspire others who are trying to regain their footing. I am able to break down the walls and barriers of those struggling because I acknowledge the devastation and inability to push through beyond a short second.

It has been 10 years



Linda Ambard. (Photo courtesy of Marathon Tours, Africa)

since my husband was killed. If I have learned anything, it is this: Everyone hurts sometimes. Everyone has been through something or will go through something. When we, as an organization, show our vulnerabilities and talk about the choices we make in reclaiming our joy and learning to thrive versus survive, we encourage help-seeking and we encourage personal growth. While I cannot change that my husband was killed, I can honor and remember in a positive manner that creates positive change for others. (Ambard has Master of Arts degrees in military resiliency counseling from Liberty University, and education from Boise State University.)

Robins staff offers families a sense of belonging

by Jennifer Smith
Community readiness specialist

ROBINS AIR FORCE BASE, Ga. -- In addition to the Department of the Air Force's mission, our personal goal at Robins AFB is to meet Air Force Families Forever members' needs so they feel a sense of belonging. We extend great efforts to ensure families feel seen and known, through collaboration with fellow helping agencies throughout the installation to cultivate hope with families.

The 78th Air Base Wing Commander Col. Brian R. Moore has established and prioritized Robins PROUD Forum and my role is instrumental to ensure consistent lines of communication with the families are open and healthy. We are in a privileged position to hear the families share stories of encouragement and resiliency in their lives, and their fallen loved one. The forum creates a community of outreach programs, to be available to the families. It offers a place to explore greater depths of reflection and provide inspiration through the exchange of questions and answers



Kerry Rogers, surviving son of Maj. Charles E. "Bud" Rogers from the Vietnam War, speaks at a PROUD Forum event at Robins AFB, Ga. (Courtesy of Robins Public Affairs)

that deepen our insights.

Our AFFF families are diverse and multigenerational. As the AFFF representative, I work with installation leadership to provide families a lifetime connection through the DBIDS access card. Our interaction, with the families offer resources to network with people from varied backgrounds and services. Collectively, we move beyond individualistic expression to shared care, and concern. The objective of my role with the Airman and Family Readiness Center is to create a place for AFFF families to have a connection and purpose as we provide different means to honor the life of their fallen Airman and loved one.

What's next? That's the question many families are asking as we look forward to the impact of vaccines and social immunity. What will Robins AFB look like in our new reality? What will be the same? What will be different? What new opportunities are presented in the midst of these challenges? What does it take for all AFFF family members to feel connected to Robins AFB?

Our initial priority is focused to establish access to the base community. This is accomplished by ensuring all who desire to have base access receive a DBIDS card. Officials at the Air Force Personnel Center and with the 78th Security Forces Squadron are great partners in helping achieve this reality for next-of-kin family members.

Next, supportive leadership is essential to success. Commanders and civilian leaders are completely vested to demonstrate their genuine care and concern for the needs of the families.

Lastly, we encourage AFFF families to communicate with us so we know when they are ready and willing to participate. Families need to be ready to receive our support



Clare Whitlock, surviving mother of Capt. Nicholas Whitlock from Operation Enduring Freedom, speaks at a PROUD Forum event at Robins AFB, Ga. (Courtesy of Robins Public Affairs)

and hospitality with the willingness to participate with the programs and resources offered. These relationships are life-changing and necessary. It's about sharing and caring in such a way that people who before wouldn't think twice about being a part of something bigger than all of us in an irresistible way.

It is my hope that once we move to our new normal, AFFF families will feel their worth as a part of the Robins AFB community and ask, "What shall we do to join you?" (Smith is a community readiness specialist)

Parents honor their son's memory, legacy by serving vet community

by Shannon Mesenburg
Surviving stepmother

Our son XinHua was adopted from China when he was 8 years old. He was one of the most loving kids you would ever meet. He did not speak any English. For weeks, Mitch (his father) would sit on the driveway of our Ohio home while XinHua would point to things and Mitch would say what it was and write the word in chalk on the drive. He would try to say the word then repeat it in Chinese and write the Chinese character for it next to the word. Within about six weeks XinHua had a surprisingly good grip on the English language. Sarcasm was his Achilles heel; he just didn't get it most times. When he would try it, he kind of fell flat.

When XinHua went into high school he also entered Civil Air Patrol with ambition to become an Airman. XinHua was a voracious reader. It was nothing for him to read a thick paperback in a day or two, his favorite were sci-fi.

He always aced advanced calculus in high school. He was brilliant with math, often going to the base hours before his shift to tutor fellow Airmen in calculus and geometry to help them prepare for upcoming tests.

When XinHua enlisted into the Air Force, he scored so high on all his tests, he was given the option to pick his career field; he chose security forces. We had to laugh during basic training when he told us that he felt the instructors were picking on him, and after graduation he was going to write a strongly worded letter. Mitch talked him out of it. He graduated both basic training and the Security Forces Academy in 2014.

His first assignment was as a Defender at Joint Base Andrews in Maryland. We were told by his base commander that this is very unusual for a first assignment -- XinHua was that good! The secretary of state even lauded his performance, and he was coined on multiple occasions for his "attention to detail."

Never idle, XinHua raised \$3K for charities through the Joint Base Andrews half marathon; helped raise \$1.5K for the Security Forces' Group holiday party and Sr Non-Commissioned Officer Induction Event; raised funds for Angel Tree; and volunteered to manage the base library with over 30,000 books. He had his first deployment to Qatar in 2018. He was in the process of being promoted to staff sergeant at the time of his death.

If I heard it once, I've heard a hundred times: You must have seen some handwriting on the wall.



Mitch, XinHua and Shannon Mesenburg. (Courtesy photo)

There was no handwriting, our son had just been with us a couple months earlier, choosing to spend his entire leave with us after his deployment to Qatar. He told us he loved the Air Force and planned to make a career of it. He was almost finished with testing to move into the Intelligence career field. There was no sign. In fact, it would have appeared as if he had the world by the tail. Planning to invest in a duplex and let the renter make his house payments for him, he met with a mortgage broker.

He had well laid-out plans for a future. This made it sheer shock when on Saturday Jan. 5, 2019, we were sitting by a fire in our lanai at 8:03 p.m. when both of our phones received a simultaneous text ping from XinHua. The text was of a hand-written note that spoke of the love he had for us and his friends. It asked that we remember him fondly and went on to say, "The stress life has given me has finally broken my will to live." It was a suicide note.

I frantically tried to call and text him. Mitch called 911

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and was told he had to call his local 911 in Virginia. The dispatcher instead gave him the number for the local police department. The officer we reached stayed on the line for the 12 minutes it took police to reach his home, and said someone would call us as soon as they had any information. But nobody called.

Every couple of hours throughout the night, we called again and again. We were always told someone would call, but they never did. Finally, at 4:30 a.m. Sunday morning, we called again and the officer on duty said that the military had taken over the investigation and would be reaching out soon. We begged the officer for information and he finally said our son was dead of an apparent suicide. He went on to say that because it was a military matter, protocol dictates the military will have to provide any further information.

At 5:30 a.m., we received a knock at our door, it was an Air Force chaplain with another Airman letting us know “officially” that our brilliant handsome son was gone. He was only 25 years old.

Often throughout our lives, we have been asked by mentors “what is your why”? For some that answer is simple, for others, maybe not so much. Personally, we each struggled with this for some time.

Then this horrific, unimaginable loss instantly changed our world forever. After the fog lifted and our new normal set in, we had two choices: let this tragedy destroy us or channel our grief to stop this from happening to another lost soul or family.

We found Mission 22, an amazing non-profit to help raise awareness about the alarming rate of veteran suicide and provide free programs to veterans suffering from PTSD, TBI and other issues they face when they need it the most. They have also started programs for the family members, all anonymous and free.

We were selected as official Mission 22 ambassadors. We have always loved, supported and helped raise funds for our veterans, especially Vietnam Vets. Mitch’s brother, Terrance Mesenburg, was killed in Vietnam in 1969 when Mitch was only 8 and Terry was at the tender age of 20. We have so many veterans in southwest Florida, and it takes a community to heal a warrior! Our community has shown their love and support during the many fundraisers for Mission 22. The biggest, our Solid 7 Dice Run raised over \$13,000 for Mission 22. The local Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans and American Legion 110 recently donated an additional \$5,000 to Mission 22 in our son’s honor. We are humbled by the support and inspired every day to carry on this mission.

We have also partnered with Holly’s Hope of North Port, Florida. Holly was a teacher that committed suicide Feb. 11, 2017. Holly was much loved by her community.

She was an outgoing teacher who cared greatly about her students by going above and beyond to make learning interactive and fun. Her brave parents and close friends/former students started Holly’s Hope. Their mission is to educate and empower our community to reduce suicide rates and help those who have lived through it.

We want to bring awareness to mental health – especially in the younger generation. Holly’s Hope has made miraculous strides, getting Survivors of Suicide, or SOS, groups set up in the local schools and groups for adults. I was honored to be placed on their board of directors in October 2020. We are currently working on creating free and anonymous support groups for all our local first responders. What they see is beyond tragic every day, especially with the pandemic. We need to take care of them as they do us – the suicide rate is up everywhere!

Because I worked in the World Trade Center on the 91st floor when it was bombed Feb. 26, 1993, and I was trapped in the stairwell for over four hours before the brave firemen freed us, I have been a huge supporter of all first responders. We have participated in many Stephen Siller Tunnel to Towers Foundation events. I was even a keynote speaker May 18, 2019, for the T2T Tower Climb in Tampa, talking about my experience and our mission in honor of our son. Stephen Siller was a fireman that perished on 9/11. It was his day off, but he did not hesitate to show up to help because of his deep sense of duty to serve and protect.

Mitch and I struggle every day, but in the wake of tragedy we found “our why.” We find purpose and hope in serving our veteran community and beyond, raising suicide awareness, and offering help and hope for our heroes.



Senior Airman XinHua Mesenburg while deployed to Qatar. (Courtesy photo)

ID card makes son feel like part of the family again

by Roy Knight
Gold Star son

On May 19, 1967, Maj. Roy Knight, a 36-year-old fighter pilot with the 602nd Fighter Squadron (Commando), led two A-1E Skyraiders on an attack of a heavily defended target complex on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the Houaphan province of Laos. As he rolled in on the target, his Skyraider was hit by concentrated 37/57mm anti-aircraft fire. His wingman radioed for him to eject, but he pressed on and hit the target, pulling off before the aircraft departed controlled flight and crashed in the target area. His wingman, also targeted, did not see a parachute nor was there any voice or beeper transmissions. It would be 52 years before my father's fate was confirmed and he was brought home.



I was born at Itazuki Air Base in Fukuoka, Japan. Like most Air Force “brats,” I was well-traveled. By the time I was 10 years old I had lived in four different countries and on numerous military bases. This was followed by three years at Laughlin Air Force Base, Texas, where my father was an instructor pilot before he received his orders to Udorn Royal Thai AFB, Thailand – and his final mission.

My life as an Air Force dependent was like most other Air Force kids, different from our civilian counterparts and quite wonderful. My memories include those things one might expect if you have ever spent any time around an Air Force base: airplanes always overhead and fast friendships with the other dependent

kids we played with. There was the pool, BX, commissary, library, and the base theater (everyone on their feet for the national anthem before the movie.) There were the impressive air police (as they were known then) who delivered a well-produced salute at the front gate. The neat and clean base and housing areas.

There was the evening retreat when everyone stopped whatever they were doing including driving, to face the flag until the music stopped. Dad in his mess dress and Mom in a beautiful evening gown going to an Air Force “dining out” event. And a million other memories of the greatest existence a kid could have. I was part of something special, a close-knit group with unique shared experiences that others would not understand. I was part of the Air Force “family.”

Of course, my life changed dramatically on that day in May 1967 in many ways. First and foremost, my hero was lost. In what was a uniquely Vietnam War paradigm, that will probably never be seen again, Dad was not “killed in action” he was “missing in action.” This distinction is important because it put my family in a limbo of stasis that lasted for eight long years. While other Air Force friends continued their careers with the next assignment and the next base, we simply stopped. Everything stopped. We waited for him to come home and we could resume the wonderful life we had before. But that was not to be.

My family stayed in this status until late 1974 when Dad was declared Killed in Action along with all the other MIA's and POW's who had not been returned after the 1973 homecomings. Shortly after that, I surrendered my dependent ID card and my relationship with the Air Force changed. I was now completely on the outside, a process that began with Dad's shoot-down and ended with handing over that tan card. I had not



Roy Knight and his new ID card.
(Courtesy photo)

only lost my father, but I had also lost my “family” as well.

In February 2019, an amazing group of active-duty military and DOD personnel of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, or DPAA, located and recovered human remains at a crash site in Laos. Dad received a hero's welcome for his trip home and to his final resting place under the post oaks in a little rural cemetery surrounded by his brothers and parents. A place he grew up. Where he hunted and fished and played ball. Dad was home.

A few months later I learned about the installation card that was being offered to family members like me that allowed some limited access to some USAF facilities. I contacted the Air Force and within a week I was at the March Air Reserve Base Visitor Center where I received my new access card.

This little card, which will allow me some access to Air Force bases and other benefits such as national park access, is so much more. I carry around a little piece of plastic that says I am still part of the “family.” Even at my age and long separated

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from that part of my life, this is meaningful.

What was the first thing I did after leaving the visitors center? I went through the gate, presenting the wrong side of the card to the Airman there, of course. I then drove down to the flight line, making sure I didn't drive too fast (some things you don't forget about driving on an Air Force base), past the beautiful old buildings and hangars that are living examples of the Air Force heritage at March, and then returned to the tower and ops parking lot.

I pulled into a parking spot and quietly ate the sandwich that my wife had prepared for me. It was a beautiful southern California day and wonderfully peaceful as I just sat and took it all in. While I was there, I saw a C-17 launch and an MQ-9 recover -- spectacular! After I was done, I drove back out the same way, stopping at the F-4 static display for a quick selfie with my new card. That was enough. It was a good day.



Maj. Roy Knight and family before he was shot down in 1967. (Courtesy photo)

Reps ready to help with getting installation access cards

by *Tammy Courmoyer*
The Connection editor

The installation access card is an Air Force chief of staff initiative which allows eligible family members of fallen Airmen and Guardians who perished while serving in a duty status gain access to Air and Space Force installations. Access encourages survivors to attend memorial or recognition events, and approved morale, welfare, and recreation activities.

When Roy Knight learned he could get an access card, he contacted the Air Force Families Forever representative, Edward Terlaje, at California's Los Angeles Air Force Base. Terlaje prepared the screening form and provided it to local officials for the required background screening. Because it was a shorter drive, Terlaje arranged for Knight to get his card at March Air Reserve Base by forwarding the paperwork to Valerie Fioretta in the Airman & Family Readiness Center there.

Fioretta was willing to help. "It made me very happy to be

able to assist him," said Fioretta. "To the families of our fallen members, getting back on base gives them a link to their loved one and a connection to their military heritage. It is huge!"

Fioretta made arrangements with the base's Visitor Control Center staff to meet Knight when he arrived and to help him through the process. Within a week, Knight met with Peggy Debord at the visitors' center who helped him finalize the paperwork. Afterward, he had his picture taken, and then he was presented with his new access card.

Terlaje shared in Knight's joy.

"The family members are always so grateful, and that makes me feel good that I can help in that small way," he said. "Helping survivors gain access to Air Force installations is just one of the many ways AFFF program representatives can lend a hand, and let them know that they have not been forgotten and are part of the Air Force family forever."

Family members interested in receiving an installation access card should contact their nearest active-

duty Airman & Family Readiness Center and Air Force Families Forever representative. A list of installations can be located at <https://www.afpc.af.mil/Airman-and-Family/Air-Force-Families-Forever/>.

**Visit the
[Air Force Families
Forever webpage](https://www.afpc.af.mil/Airman-and-Family/Air-Force-Families-Forever/)**

**for program
information,
services, and a
listing of all
Airman & Family
Readiness Centers
worldwide.**



ADVOCATE'S CORNER

With Randi Ramcharan
Dept. of the Air Force gold star and
surviving family member representative

Welcome to the Advocate's Corner!

This will be a place where I can share with you resources, things I'm hearing, or what we're working on. For this newsletter, I'd like to share financial resources available to survivors as we know there are likely financial changes after the death of your Airman or Guardian.

The military provides several resources to help, whether you need to update your budget with the change in income, assistance filing taxes, and more. Below are the resources available – your Air Force Families Forever representative is always a great start to understanding which is best for you:

- Financial counselors: The Airman & Family Readiness Center at each installation and Military OneSource

have accredited financial counselors available to assist Department of Defense ID card holders. These financial counselors can provide assistance through face-to-face or virtual appointments. For financial counselors on the installation, work with your Air Force Families Forever representative. Visit [Military OneSource](#).

- Financial Point: Next of kin who are named beneficiaries on the member's DD Form 93 or virtual Record of Emergency Data, or a beneficiary by law, can request financial counseling services through Financial Point. This service is provided through the

Department of Veterans Affairs. Visit [Financial Point](#) information, visit: <https://www.benefits.va.gov/insurance/bfcs.asp>.

- Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors Financial Wellness Resources: Military survivors registered with TAPS casework services can request access to free financial wellness resources at any time. TAPS partners with ClearPoint's Military Reconnect program to offer financial webinars and other financial counseling services to all military survivors. To request TAPS casework assistance, call 800-959-TAPS (8277) or email casework@taps.org.

